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Of Profit and Career Loss

By Sander Vanocur

CBS will devote two hours this Thursday night to an ugly episode in the short history of broadcasting.

It is entirely appropriate. CBS was responsible for that episode, the destruction of the career of John Henry Faulk, who was fired from his radio show at WCBS, New York, in 1956.

The two-hour program, 9 to 11, is called "Fear On Trial," the title of the book in which Faulk described what happened to him when a vigilante organization, Aware Inc., charged that Faulk was pro-Communist.

It would be worth watching simply for the splendid performances of William Devane as Faulk and George C. Scott as Louis Nizer, the attorney who successfully sued Aware Inc. for libel.

The jury awarded Faulk a record $3.5 million in damages. Faulk received but a fraction of that amount, which was considerably reduced in the appeal process. But Faulk's career in broadcasting was ended. CBS continued as the most profitable company in broadcasting.

It is also worth watching for another reason. It details in depressing accuracy how a supposedly powerful organization allowed itself to be intimidated by Laurence Johnson, the owner of a supermarket chain in Syracuse, N.Y., and a so-called "professional consultant" on communism named Vincent Hartnett.

CBS was not alone in allowing itself to be so intimidated. The entire broadcast industry was also involved in the capitulation, denying employment to those whom Hartnett would not certify.

What this program does not make clear is why CBS allowed itself to be so intimidated. That is not the fault of David Rintels, who wrote the script and wrote it well. The problem lies in the fact that the people who ran CBS could not explain to you now precisely why they knuckled under.

CBS did not have to knuckle under. In the early '50s, when blacklisting was started, CBS had become the No. 1 network. If it had taken a stand, NBC and ABC also might have resisted. But CBS did not take that stand. The men who dominated it, William S. Paley and his chief operating officer, Dr. Frank Stanton, did not take that stand.

All organizations are derivative of the people who are at the top. If they do not send explicit signals downward, then the individuals who serve beneath them have little incentive to demonstrate courage and deny fear.

What apparently bothered CBS more than the blacklist itself was the fact that Faulk decided to challenge it. Two CBS executives appeared as subpoenaed witnesses for the dfense, taking the position that CBS had fired Faulk becuase of poor ratings.

Alone among the top officials at CBS, Edward R. Murrow came to Faulk's defense. Murrow, a member of the CBS board of directors, gave Faulk $7,500 of his personal funds to help wage the struggle. When Faulk protested he could not accept that much money as a loan, Murrow told him to consider it an investment in his country.

Long before Murrow left CBS to head the USIA in 1961, he had outlived his usefulness to CBS. The reason: he had become too controversial.

That is the one thing you must never be in broadcasting, too controversial. Be wrong. Be timid. Above all, be safe. You can go a long way in broadcasting by avoiding controversy. You will be rewarded for it. You will even be honored.

Does CBS deserve any credit for airing an incident that shows it in a sorry light? Possibly. Perhaps it is a form of corporate expiation that may make people forget how callow was its behavior at a time when it could have led and did not.

CBS and the other networks went on to greater glories such as the maximization of profits. Faulk went back to Texas where he now lives on a farm, lectures and does a modest amount of broadcasting.

He is said to harbor no bitterness over what happened to him. Perhaps. But only Faulk, and perhaps one or two others, can understand what it does to a man when he takes a stand and finds that he takes that stand alone, utterly alone, and waits and waits for others to join him. And they never come.

CBS photo

William Devane as Faulk.

Photo by Tom Curtis for The Washington Post

John Henry Faulk in CBS days, left, and today.